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ABSTRACT

Active learning is not a new concept, and recent research suggests that students who have opportunities to participate in the learning process are much more successful students in terms of achievement test scores and individual happiness. This paper discusses some recent research on active learning, including a description of a microsociety school in Lowell, Massachusetts. A list of keywords the author compiled in the course of the research is provided. A 16-item list of research studies associated with active learning is included. (DB)

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ACTIVE LEARNING IN SECONDARY SOCIAL STUDIES

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ACTIVE LEARNING IN SECONDARY SOCIAL STUDIES

In the beginning.....

My focus was on what kinds of active learning take place or are possible in secondary social studies classes and what effects active learning has on achievement, comprehension, and motivation. All social studies courses were within my focus - this included history, economics, law, political science, psychology, sociology, and geography. I am still struggling with a definition of active learning, but for the purposes of this search, I focused on discovery learning, experiential learning, participatory learning, simulations, and cooperative learning.

In the end.....

My first problem was finding research reports, as opposed to descriptive reports, on active learning, and my second problem was finding studies conducted on a secondary school level in social studies. So, I abandoned that focus, which I thought was broad to start with, and replaced it with a broader focus that included any age student in any subject area as long as the study in question described programs which were adaptable to secondary social studies classes.

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KEYWORD LIST

EDUCATION:

Education, curriculum and instruction
Education, secondary
Education, elementary
Education, adult
Educational research
Teaching methods

ACTIVE LEARNING:

Participatory learning
Discovery learning
Experiential learning
Simulation
Cooperative learning
Student developed material
Media production
Competition
Generative theory/paradigm
Cognitive theory/paradigm

AUTHORS:

Wittrock, M.
Bruner, J.
Dewey, J.
Piaget, J.
Johnson, R.T.
Johnson, D.W.
Slavin, R.E.
Bransford, J.
Keller, C.

SOCIAL STUDIES:

Economics
History
Geography
Political science
Psychology
Law
Social Science
Government
Cultural Studies

With Silver Platter, I combined these keywords in every way I could think of. I also combined these with 'achievement', 'comprehension', and 'motivation.'

Active learning is not a new idea. John Dewey and many others thought of it long before I did. For over fifty years, educators in the social studies field have been advocating active learning in the classroom. But what would you see if you observed most social studies classrooms today? Probably you would see a teacher lecturing and students listening (or pretending to listen) and taking notes. Little has changed.....

I recently looked at a paper I had written in the early 1970's - almost twenty years ago. It dealt with the lack of useful knowledge and learning that occurs in high schools and was based on answers to questionnaires I administered to male students who had graduated three years before. One of the students wrote that you would have to change the whole school society, starting with grade one, to make the high school more useful and enjoyable. He also said that the most important thing in education "is to make what we learn relate to our lives." I concluded the paper with : "To know about something is to be its observer. What is needed is for the student to be a participant." Little has changed.....

Is there hope? In the Fall, 1981, the Lowell, Ma Public Schools established the first microsociety school in the nation. Students created and continue to create micro-banking, governmental, legal, and cultural systems. Interacting with these structures is a dynamic part of the students' education. There is no prescribed curriculum - the students and the teachers develop their own curriculum and they learn by doing. Among other activities, they, the students, legislate, adopt budgets, pass tax measures, administer justice, govern, and read and write and study math with purpose (Richmond, 1989).

Phillips and Faris (1977), in a comparative study of two learning methods, concluded that students will probably learn more if given the chance to do

so in nontraditional ways. In their comparative study of two groups of senior government students (same teacher), one group learned in the traditional lecture, discussion mode, while the other group used innovative techniques including independent study and internships. The active learning students tested higher in most of the tests during the school year and surpassed the traditional students in achievement after the first few weeks.

According to Wittrock (in MacKenzie and White, 1982): 1) students need to generate new meaning or new information by relating learning experiences to prior knowledge; 2) students must be active in processing the new material; and 3) the more active the student is in processing his own material, the more effective and permanent the learning will be. In a study of retention abilities of eighth and ninth graders after a geography field trip, MacKenzie and White (1982) found that students who had processed their own information on the field trip showed marked superiority in retention of knowledge over the field-trip students who were given information by the teacher.

Do the results at the microsociety school in Lowell support these principles and research results on active learning? In 1988, the average eigth grader tested at 9.3 grade level in reading - two years above the national norm - and in math the average score on a standarized math test was 10.4 grade level, the best in the city. In what could be considered a measure of satisfaction, attendance is the highest in the city - 96% (Richmond, 1989). Students not only construct their own curriculum and their own micro society, but they also construct and process their own learning experiences and relate their learning to their everyday lives. Something has changed .....

Paul Simon (1973) in one of his old songs wrote, "When I think back on all the crap I learned in high shcool, it's a wonder that I can think at all." Not enough has changed .....

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